Earlier this year, I participated in a college lecture that was both commonplace and radical. As a professional theater critic and reporter, I am often asked to speak to theater, English and composition students about the tools and role of criticism, so in that way, my invitation to address a group of undergraduates at Davidson College in Charlotte, N.C., was like any other.

It was how I delivered the lecture that made the experience stand out. I live in New York City, and the professor who invited me to her class at Davidson didn’t have the travel budget to get me a Metrocard for the subway, let alone a plane ticket to North Carolina. Her suggestion was that I call her class using Skype, an online calling program that allows users to see and hear each other live over their computer screens. She figured that since Skype lets families and friends stay in touch across enormous distances, it might connect students and guest faculty as well.

And so I set up my laptop and Skyped with a roomful of undergraduates. After some technical difficulties, they were able to see and hear me on a large screen in their classroom, and I was able to see and hear them as well. They listened, took notes, asked questions and engaged in discussion. Some of them even contacted me later. Except for the fact that I never shared a physical space with them, my experience with the Davidson students was remarkably similar to the experience I’ve had with students in the actual world.

But as radical as it was for me personally, my Skype lecture was just part of the rapidly expanding universe of social media in higher education. Interactive, community-focused online tools – think of programs like Skype, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, blogs, wikis and the educational software Blackboard – are becoming so dominant in the classroom that it’s hard to imagine any professor or student making it through a week (or even a day) without them.

Consider a recent survey conducted by the Babson Survey Research Group in collaboration with New Marketing Labs and the education-consulting group Pearson Learning Solutions. Drawing from almost 1,000 college and university faculty members nationwide, the survey revealed that more than 80 percent use social media in some capacity, whether they’re watching a friend’s cat video or updating their Facebook status, and more than half use the tools as part of their teaching.

And social media get used in the classrooms in various ways. The Babson survey notes that 30 percent use social networks to communicate with their students (trading posts on blogs, for instance) while more than 52 percent use online videos, podcasts, blogs, and wikis (group-authored Web sites) during actual class time.

What’s more, this realm is not just the province of the bushy-tailed adjunct professors who are barely out of college themselves. The survey reveals that older faculty (those teaching for 20 years or more) use social media at almost the same level as their younger peers.

All this information begs a question: If more and more teachers are using social media, then what does that mean for higher education? What do faculty and students gain (and lose) when their academic lives are so inextricably connected to the Twitters and YouTubes of the world?

**Acceptance and Hesitation**

Perhaps more than anyone, Howard Rheingold is in a position to state what social
media mean for the future of higher education. A key player in the online revolution since the early 1980s, he has created a “social media classroom” that freely invites participants from all over the world to dig through his stores of information about the culture, history and power of social media. He’s also taken this work into the brick-and-mortar education world, teaching a course called Virtual Communities and Social Media at both Stanford University and the University of California-Berkeley.

“What are the benefits of social media to students?” he muses. “There are plenty: greater student engagement, greater student interest, students taking more control of their education and more responsibility for their education.”

He might also have added that social media often inspire new creativity in the way that subjects are taught. Take Jeremy Fiebig, an assistant professor of theater at the University of North Carolina/Fayetteville State University. Fiebig has used the interactive online video game Second Life to drop his students into a remarkably faithful online replication of Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre, which was recently added to the game’s online universe. By creating and controlling individual characters (or “avatars”), his students can join him in the digital Globe and get an interactive sense of what it was like see a play there.

While they’re inside Second Life, Fiebig also has his students “perform” plays by typing their lines into the game’s chat function. He also encourages them to have deeper discussions about course material via chat. “Beyond the value of actually having them explore a recreation of an Elizabethan theater, that’s the pedagogical reason to do it,” he says. “Students who don’t share in class, who maybe don’t feel comfortable talking, might feel comfortable typing or writing.”

For some students, using social media is being presented not merely as a valuable way to participate in class, but as an essential part of preparing for a career. When Jimmy Bean, a senior communications major at California State University-Fullerton, took Communications 201, his professor launched the course by introducing a reporter who had landed his job at a major newspaper because the editors enjoyed his personal blog about the technology industry. “The topic of having a blog has come up in all of my comm classes,” Bean says. “They say that it’s one of the best things you can put on your résumé, that you have a blog that you update at least twice a week. It’s living, breathing proof that you know what you’re talking about and that you have enough passion to write about it that you’ll do it for free.”

Bean’s comment points to some of the problems with social media, however. For one thing, he notes that writing on a blog usually doesn’t mean getting paid, and indeed, for a technological culture that requires so much work, it rarely results in economic reward. “It’s a lot more work for a professor to use social media properly, to comment on a blog or edit a wiki,” says Rheingold. “And are the professors getting paid more for that? Probably not.”

On a similar note, Fiebig adds, “One of the big challenges is making sure that all students have access to the technology. Most people have computers and smart phones, but you still can’t count on every student being able to afford one.”

Some complaints about social media in the classroom are even more basic. “I’m pretty adamantly against using social media in my classes,” says Paul Menard, who has been an adjunct humanities professor at several colleges in the New York area. “I find that there’s enough confusion between the personal and the professional in a college classroom as it is.”

As for myself, while I certainly felt I had a good conversation with the students in Davidson, I also felt somewhat stifled by the fact that talking via Skype makes it almost impossible to make eye contact. You can’t look directly into your webcam and also look at the screen to watch the person you’re speaking to, so when you’re speaking, you tend to look at a camera, and when you’re watching the screen, you tend to see a person’s forehead as they peer at your image on their computer. This makes the lack of personal contact feel palpable. That’s frustrating, because the best ideas often come from sharing an actual space with someone.

The Literacies of Social Media

Then again, no one is suggesting that social media are flawless tools or that they should totally replace live, person-to-person interaction. What’s more, Rheingold insists that we must be trained to become literate in social media, that we are not inherently born knowing how to use them effectively.

To that end, he frequently discusses five interconnected “literacies” of social media. They are:

1) Attention: The ability to know where and when to place one’s attention when navigating various types of social media and when navigating between social media and “real world” moments. Rheingold, standing in front of a class, often would not be able to get his students to stop staring at their laptops or their phones. He suggests that we must be trained in how to decide what deserves our attention, or we will become overwhelmed and distracted.

2) Participation: This is a question of being a “good participant,” of knowing how and when to post a comment on a blog, for example, and knowing what kind of comment will be helpful and appropriate.

3) Collaboration: Rheingold argues that online communities are designed to thrive via collaboration, that lone wolves refusing to listen to other people are going to slow down or derail progress. Wikipedia, for instance, is a Web site that doesn’t work unless its collective members know how to embrace each other’s contributions, and therefore, users need to become literate in the skills of collaboration, both online and in the actual world.

4) Network Awareness: Broadly, this means being literate in how a social media network operates. Mastering the privacy settings on Facebook, for instance, requires literacy.

5) Critical Consumption: Rheingold also refers to this literacy as “crap detection,” the ability to surf an ocean of online information and decide which nuggets are reliable and which are disposable. “Determining which information is relevant is up to the consumer, not to the provider, a major shift from the model where some editor sits and decides what we need to hear,” Rheingold says. “If we can pick any idea out of the air, we need to be able to evaluate what we’re seeing and hearing.”

Taken together, these literacies underscore what might be the most inescapable truth about social media in education: No matter what we think of them, they aren’t going away. Now, as responsible citizens, we need to accept that and start empowering ourselves to use social media well. For some, that might mean not using them at all, and for others, it might mean using them in every classroom session. But whatever we decide, we need our choices to be well-informed.